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ABSTRACT

This paper synthesizes Birnbaum's collegial model for describing academic institutions. In this model administrators, faculty, and students comprise a community of colleagues a collegium. Typically, institutions that fit the collegial model have a small enrollment of full-time on-campus students who follow a liberal arts curriculum. Since faculty and administrators usually hold terminal or advanced degrees, this results in an egalitarian environment of mutual respect. The community environment is sustained because all participants share common values and agree on the mission and character of the college. A pure collegial institution requires a small student enrollment with a concomitant small number of faculty and administrators to allow frequent personal interactions. Loops of interaction tend to be nonlinear, with frequent interactions and mutual liking reinforcing each other. Additionally, under this model the administration is tightly coupled to the interests of the core clientele students who come from a fairly well-defined background; faculty members are loosely coupled to professional guilds but tightly coupled within the faculty and with the administration. Leadership is expected to use influence rather than power. (DB)

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Birnbaum's Model of the Collegial Institution

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INTRODUCTION

In the book titled "How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership," Birnbaum (1988) presents models that can be used to describe five types of academic institutions. The typology includes the collegial, bureaucratic, political, anarchical, and cybernetic institutions. Birnbaum's models describe each institution with regards to its community, characteristics, loops of interaction, coupling and leadership. An understanding of these models can facilitate developing the ideal method of interaction (such as governance) with any particular academic organization. The purpose of this thesis is to provide a synopsis of the collegial model.

Birnbaum (1988) describes the collegial institution as representing a community of administrators, faculty, and students in which all groups work together to create a quality educational environment. Permeating this community is a milieu of mutual respect among scholars, good discourse, and discretion by consensus. Class distinctions based on academic discipline or administrative position are de-emphasized to allow interaction among members as that between equals. Birnbaum (1988) describes such a college "as a community of colleagues—[or] in other words. . . a collegium" (p. 87).

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THE COLLEGIAL INSTITUTION'S COMMUNITY

The collegial institution is typified as having a small enrollment of students engaged in numerous baccalaureate programs in the arts and sciences (Birnbaum, 1988). The core curriculum for these academic programs is based on a general education. The students come from the top one-fourth of their respective high school classes, attend full-time, and are generally required to reside in on-campus housing. The majority of the students are within the eighteen- to twenty-one-year-old range and many of the students have family members who were previously associated with the college (Birnbaum).

The majority of the faculty at the collegium hold terminal degrees (Birnbaum, 1988). They are expected to remain scholars and in so doing keep abreast of recent developments in their respective fields. However, the faculty is not pressured to conduct independent research with the concomitant publishing obligations. Respect from peers and career advancement is largely based on their ability to teach and advise students. Faculty tend to live near the institution and socializing between the students and faculty is not uncommon (Birnbaum).

The campus provides the focal point for the active, albeit modest, social activities that take place (Birnbaum, 1988). While many student organizations and activities do exist, at the collegial institution the primary emphasis remains the pursuit of academic excellence by both faculty and students.

THE COLLEGIAL INSTITUTION'S CHARACTERISTICS

In addition to the faculty, a majority of the administrators have advanced or professional degrees (Birnbaum, 1988). Therefore, an egalitarian environment based on mutual respect exists when the two factions interact. Decisions are discussed and members of each group are afforded the opportunity to comment. However, while the positions of persons outside these groups (i.e., staff members and students) are important to the faculty and the administrators, the participatory right of these "others" at deliberative assemblies is often given only token attention (Birnbaum).

The mode of discretion is typified by thorough deliberation (Birnbaum, 1988). Therefore decision making, especially on important topics, may be time-consuming in order to allow the expression of all opinions. While the views of the senior faculty carry greater influence than those of the junior members, decisions are ultimately made by consensus. Professors regarded by their colleagues as superior teachers also exude a greater influence when expressing their views. Note that unanimity is not requisite for consensus. Birnbaum (1988) differentiates unanimity and "real consensus" (p. 88) in that the former can occur via undue influence on the voting members while the latter occurs when genuine, participatory discussions precede a vote thereby generating comfort and support concerning the democratically decided alternative.

The role of administrators is similar to that of any other institution in that it has the responsibility of providing student services and representing the interests of the college to the public (Birnbaum, 1988). A major difference is that administrators are not placed above the faculty or the collegium as a whole but rather "the administration is understood to be subordinate to the collegium and carries out the collegium's will" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 89). It is not uncommon for faculty members to serve briefly as administrators after which time they return to teaching.

The presidency of the collegial institution is viewed by the collegium as a service position rather than one of superiority (Birnbaum, 1988). The special powers that the president maintains is important because it permits that individual to facilitate the accomplishment of the collegium agenda. While interactions between the collegium and the president are informal, formality is exercised when "others" are present to enhance the dignity of the position. The president is viewed by the collegium as the senior faculty member, the official spokesperson in corporate affairs, and the chairman of their deliberative assemblies (Birnbaum).

The community environment is sustained because all parties involved share common values and opinions on the mission and character of the college. "Board members tend to be alumni, administrators tend to be faculty, and there is general agreement on the expected and accepted relationships among and between the groups" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 90). In the collegial model, the real differences which do exist in terms of the specific legal authority of certain parties are typically ignored (Birnbaum).

A prerequisite of a pure collegial institution (i.e., not a hybrid of several models) is maintaining a small enrollment with a concomitant small number of faculty and administrators (Birnbaum, 1988). This permits frequent personal interactions to occur thus maintaining the congenial environment.

> Collegiality, seen as a community of individuals with shared interests, can probably be maintained only where regular face-to-face contact provides the necessary coordinating mechanisms and where programs and traditions are integrated enough to permit the development of a coherent culture. Size is probably thus a necessary but not sufficient condition of a collegium, and this limits the possibility of the development of collegiality on an institutional level to relatively small campuses. (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 93)

Informal face-to-face meetings take place in numerous social settings as well as in the more formal location of committee meetings. (Note that in large institutions, collegiality can still exist within small subgroups.)

LOOPS OF INTERACTION

"Collegium members interact and influence each other through a network of continuous personal exchanges based on social attraction, value consensus, and reciprocity" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 94). Supporting the perpetuation of "value consensus" is the transmittal of ideals and beliefs to successive generations of the collegium. The interaction of collegium members is described by Birnbaum as a nonlinear process. A nonlinear process is one in which small perturbations in the initial conditions can cause large and sometimes unpredictable changes in the resultant outcome (Baker & Gollub, 1990; Schroeder, 1991). This is due to the fact that a nonlinear process represents an "intricate system of interacting variables" (Volk, 1995, p. 184). The perturbations introduced at the collegium are the tasks performed by individual members in the hope of developing a cohesive working group.

The exponential growth characteristic of nonlinear processes (Baker & Gollub, 1990) also occurs due to the reciprocity of interpersonal "liking" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 94) and interaction. Birnbaum describes the situation as "liking leads to interaction, and interaction leads to liking" (p. 94). However, this growth is not completely deterministic because the nature of the interaction is a confounding variable. If the interaction is involuntary, under the auspices of authority, or is creating an unsuccessful institution, then increases in interaction may not increase the level of liking (Birnbaum). However, these situations are seldom the case and a direct relationship between interaction and liking is typical of the collegial model. To further support this relationship, Birnbaum states that the egalitarian environment of the collegium is conducive to interaction as people tend to interact more frequently when status differences are nonexistent. Such interactions further reduce differences in status (Birnbaum).

These interactions occur not only in the professional setting but also in nonwork situations. People who like each other tend to spend more time together away from work whereby their activities and interests become homogenized (Birnbaum, 1988). Values and beliefs are subsequently shared and reinforced. This situation enhances the sensitivity of collegium members to personal beliefs which plays an important role when new members are selected for appointment. "Good matches between people and the organization" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 96) is given a high priority in the selection process. Thus, new appointees are typically successful unless they exhibit aberrant behavior after joining the community. If this occurs, members of the collegium will likely express their disapproval of the new member overtly or via a lack of subsequent interaction. This situation is not irreversible, however, and the new member can alter negative feelings by conforming to expected norms (Birnbaum).

Expected norms evolve when individuals interact and expectations concerning behavior in particular situations develop. "Informal norms control behavior even more powerfully than do written rules and regulations" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 97). Such norms are more influential at the collegium, as opposed to a larger institution, because the low number of interacting members can (unconsciously) develop norms which are expected across the entire institution (Birnbaum).

COUPLING WITHIN THE COLLEGIAL MODEL

In general, coupling refers to the amount of shared variables and their relative level of importance between organizational subsystems (Birnbaum, 1988). Thus, tight coupling between subsystems occurs when there exists a commonality of components between the subsystems whereby changes that occur in the components of one subsystem are reflected in changes in other subsystems. Conversely, loose coupling is defined to exist between subsystems when changes in one subsystem have little effect on the other(s) (Birnbaum).

Because potential students of the collegial institution come from a fairly well-defined background, "the administration is tightly coupled to the interests of this core clientele" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 98). Thus, the institution is likely to respond to the demands of this select group. However, coupling with other external factors is typically loose. The institution remains focused on the needs of their traditional pool of students and problems associated with other groups of students is of no major consequence to the collegium.

Faculty members are loosely coupled to the guilds of their profession; thus, curricular changes that reflect leading edge research do not occur. However, tight coupling exists within the faculty of the collegium. Changes that occur in one area of the core curriculum typically lead to additional course changes (Birnbaum, 1988).

The coupling between the faculty and administrators is tight because of the existence of shared values as well as shared personnel (Birnbaum, 1988). However, within the administrative subsystem loose coupling exists due to the egalitarian environment. Suggestions, rather than directives, are typically given by senior academic officers which lead to few changes in the administrative process. Additionally, discretion by consensus leads to little accountability for poor decisions thereby producing a loose coupling between a decision and the responsible person (Birnbaum, 1988).

But the advantage of consensus decision-making is that the participation of all members of the collegium increases the likelihood that all available options will be discussed (Birnbaum, 1988). Such participatory discussions lead to an understanding of the adopted alternative among all collegium members which increases the likelihood of their subsequent support and commitment. This personal commitment reduces the need to impose formal methods of control that would be used to insure conformity to the adopted measure. This latter situation would be severely detrimental to the collegial community by creating alienation between members (Birnbaum).

LEADERSHIP IN THE COLLEGIAL INSTITUTION

The use of power is seldom an issue because as one progresses to higher ranks in the collegium, the greater is the likelihood that the activities of that person conforms to the group norms (Birnbaum, 1988). Leaders are selected not only by the collegium but also from the collegium. High level administrators, such as the president, exert influence rather than control on the other members of the institution and the actual level of influence is predicated on their willingness to be influenced. The amount of "mutual influence" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 101) is dependent on the number of interactions between members; thus, the ability to influence in the collegium is highly dependent on the size of the institution. Birnbaum writes:

> Persons in leadership positions in collegial systems are expected to influence without coercion, to direct without sanctions, and to control without inducing alienation. They must provide benefits that other participants see as a fair exchange for yielding some degree of their autonomy. (p. 102)

Birnbaum indicates that in addition to following group norms and traditional vehicles of communication, leaders in the collegial institution should only give orders that would be construed as reasonable thus assuring compliance. Leaders should seek a deeper understanding of the values opined by other members of the collegium via enhanced listening skills and should strive to create an environment of open communication by reducing status differences among group members. Additionally, if collegium leaders encourage the self-control of individual members, then the need for administrative sanctions to deal with deviant behavior becomes unnecessary. Such sanctions, if invoked, could lead to alienation within the group (Birnbaum).

CONCLUSION

The success of the collegial institution rests on the cooperative behavior of its members. This behavior is manifested in a shared system of values, discretion by consensus, and the desire to create a quality educational environment (Birnbaum, 1988). Although the collegial institution is deeply rooted in tradition, the tight coupling of this institution to its target group of students provides the conduit through which the requirements of these students is communicated to the collegium thus providing the catalyst for change. The collegium addresses the needs of these students by adopting approaches based on deliberative and open discourse which reinforces the commitment of its members to the path adopted.

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